

Cabbages and Kings

By Jon Lehman

There's no indication that any of them actually carried cabbages, but the sailing ships whose portraits form the center of a small but fascinating exhibition at Duxbury's King Caesar historic house carried just about everything else you could make a dollar on in the 19th century. Coffee from Brazil, cotton from Charleston to England, wool from Turkey, fresh fruit from the Mediterranean, salt fish to the West Indies and molasses back, unknown cargoes and quite possibly 49ers to San Francisco.



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In the era of sealing wax and whalebone corsets, these Duxbury-built, -owned or

-captained ships were engines of the young republic's surging economy. The local shipbuilding and shipping industries provided livelihoods for generations of families - Drews and Soules and Winsors among them - which are memorialized in local street names and mansions. Two of the most successful of these Yankee captains of commerce, Ezra Weston Sr. and Jr., were each in his time referred to by townspeople as "King Caesar."

The nickname was not entirely complimentary, but it was accurate. In the 1830s, the family business was reputed to be worth more than \$1 million.

The pride these ship owners and masters felt for the vessels that carried their flags and enterprises throughout the world can be felt in these gallantly posed, crisply executed marine portraits. Sails tower and billow tautly, flags snap in the breeze and the complexities of rigging are precisely drawn.

The small town's cosmopolitan connections are noted in the captions painted by the artists at the bottom of many of the pictures: "Brig Lion of Duxbury entering Smyrna (Turkey) ... 1840" or "Brig Leander entering port of Palermo (Sicily), June 1828."

Many ship portraits were themselves commercial productions of a sort, quickly but competently painted watercolors by artists in the foreign ports who specialized in this work. For example, Raffaele Cossini, who worked in Smyrna, painted several of the portraits, including the one of the Lion, a work in pristine condition that is certainly the star of the show, loaned by Mr. and Mrs. R.C. Vose III, of the family that owns Boston's Vose Galleries.

Other paintings, some of them oils, are copies by local painters of European originals; in one of them, Cossini's name is reproduced but misspelled. And some are primitive or folk originals.

The best-known ship represented is the clipper Flying Cloud, built at Donald McKay's yard in East Boston but captained for part of her life by Henry Otis Winsor of Duxbury. The bark Maid of Orleans, built in Salem and captained by Martin Waterman of Duxbury, is seen in a high-quality photographic reproduction of a painting owned by the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem and attributed to Benjamin West, the first American artist to train and work in Europe.

The core of the exhibition is the half dozen or so marine portraits owned by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, which operates the King Caesar house and organized the show. Other paintings and memorabilia of 19th century seafaring life were contributed by Duxbury families including the Voses, and several photographic reproductions were loaned by the Peabody Essex Museum from its vast collection of New England marine art.

(Please see page 30)

from page 22

In the course of assembling this show, new historical information and connections were unearthed. According to Sally Redmond, the historical society's exhibitions chair, a list of more than 300 sailing vessels with Duxbury connections was compiled, and the information aided the Peabody Essex Museum in identifying 14 previously unknown ships.

Although these paintings are for the most part as celebratory as wedding portraits, there are a few glimpses of more sober aspects of 19th century life. One of the objects in the show is a half hull model of the brig Soule, with a brass plaque in memory of Captain Thomas Soule and his son, Albert, lost during a passage from Boston to Antwerp in 1834.

And one of the reproductions from the Peabody Essex Museum is of

a painting of the Duxbury brig Herald entering Dixcove, a small trading station in Gold Coast, Africa. The slave trade is not mentioned in the historical society's wall label, but it's hard to think of another reason for the vessel being there.

It is glimpses of real, live history like that that give this show its impact.

The exhibition, "Duxbury on the High Seas," continues through September at the King Caesar House, King Caesar Road on Powder Point, Duxbury. Hours are 1-4 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Phone 781-934-6106. Upstairs in the King Caesar House is another small exhibition, of photographs of vanished buildings, views, lifestyles and industries in the town, including the shipbuilding industry. ♦

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